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Living the Good Life on God's Good Earth (Book Review)

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institutions of mercy can have powerful consequences for those in need, not only for this life but for the life to come. Of course, it must be added that our charity is not simply for our causes; it is to give glory to God. Brooks provides a secular but compelling confirmation that God blesses lives of responsible praise, evidenced by charity. That is a good thing.

I find little to criticize about Brooks' work. His solid scholarship is well documented and explained, but informative footnotes are inconveniently accessed at the back of the book. More importantly, Brooks is rather cavalier about motivations for charitable actions. Rather dismissively he says, "…the giver's motive is irrelevant. Charity depends on behavior, not motive" (27). Despite his disregard for motives, the breadth of his findings suggests a rich vista for inquiry and analysis by sociologists that could have huge implications for causes that depend upon philanthropy.

Who will care to read Brooks' stunning findings? Of course, this work will be required reading for those with professional interests in philanthropy. But anyone concerned with contemporary American culture needs to know what this book reveals about the American people. We live in an era in which most "news" is bad news. Social critics mostly picture Americans as wasteful, selfish, consumptive, materialistic, parochial, and inconsiderate, among other terms of denunciation. However, much has been written about American exceptionalism—how America is unique and different from Asian and European cultures. Brooks has brought attention to American charity as a significant strand of that culture. He has measured its extent and explained its consequences. He has even suggested several public policy recommendations that could flow from it. Charity is a dimension of exceptional America that merits consideration, understanding, and authentic applause.

Koetje, David S. (ed). *Living the Good Life on God's Good Earth*. Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2006. 83 pages. ISBN 1-59255-292-7. Reviewed by Del Vander Zee, Professor of Biology and Environmental Studies, Dordt College.

This delightful book grew out of an extended workshop held at Calvin College in 2003, sponsored by Calvin's Seminars in Christian Scholarship. Its contents reflect the deliberations and convictions of thirteen Christian academics from across the U.S. and Canada. The book is a call to responsible and thoughtful discipleship in all of life, especially in the day-to-day living on a planet called Earth – the home of thousands of God's creatures and the handiwork of a providing Father, who has placed humankind as his image bearers (*imago dei*) to be caretakers. The book's short chapters are each a challenge to live thoughtfully and carefully in several areas, including our larger life-style and recreation choices as well as the specifics of the clothes we wear, the food we eat, and the energy we consume. Each chapter ends with a list of provocative questions, suggestions for further reading, and recommended resources or web sites. As such, the book is an excellent guide for individuals or small groups who seek to be discipled biblically and sense the call to seek first the kingdom holistically.

The first chapter opens with an excellent, concisely written summary of biblical teachings for Earth care. Although it does not take up the argument, this chapter clearly answers any concerns often cited by Christians who are wary about Earth care sliding into Earth worship. To the contrary, "Earth care is part and parcel of what it means to be Christian! At stake is nothing less than the loving care of the earth and its creatures, a proper understanding of God, and the integrity of our faith itself" (13). Strong words, I first thought on reading this passage. How might this be so? On further reflection, I can suggest that unless Christian life is grounded in the created order and recognizes our co-dependence with the non-human creation (in light of Genesis 2:15), we tend to become arrogant and dualistic and to relegate God to our spiritual life, letting market-driven mammon call the shots for everyday life.

Given the title, with its playfulness in wording, the book goes far beyond the perfunctory "lets do more recycling," which is the extent of action and imagination too often offered by Christians when environmental or Earth-care topics are raised. A basic strength of this book is that it draws on the insights and practiced experience of people from diverse areas—biology, chemistry, geography, theology, environmental science, consumer science, and human kinetics—and a dean for research. These strengths appear as the authors bring the reader into the ecological connections of living. The clothes we wear are connected to sweat shops in the two-thirds world and to shoddy environmental stewardship as world-wide resources enter the globalized chain of stuff we purchase in big-box stores. The ecological connections are fairly easy to trace. Does/should moral culpability also follow these connections to the homes and urban landscapes we live in? How not, if this is our Father's world, argue the authors.

The book integrates and ends with another important theme, namely shalom – the kingdom of God characterized by "peace and justice, compassion and delight" (79). That peace, justice, compassion, and delight extend to all God's creatures, living and non-living, so that all may flourish in doxology to their maker. In this regard, I really appreciate the opening and ending chapters, as they provide two very strong parentheses around seeds for thoughtful and care-

full living. I have tried leading more than one Christian adult discussion group where the topic was something "environmental." Even though one tries to focus on Biblical teachings, very soon the conversation degenerates into what is pragmatically possible, often based on fears or prejudices. (For example, "What will the neighbors say if I have dandelions in my lawn?" Or, "Recycling doesn't help much, and it is such a bother.") This helpful, clearly written, biblically based book should provide an antidote to this kind of tendency.

I have one main criticism: after every chapter I was looking for more. Every chapter could have been easily expanded to a few more pages of examples, suggestions, or case studies. Why not write more with such a wealth of scholarly authority? For example, the chapter on homes could have probed more deeply into how much urban domestic life is driven by popular consumer culture and not by a culture of shalom. The chapter on food would have benefited by delving more into consumer-supported agriculture and urban gardening, both examples of potential directions toward shalom. The discussion of plants we grow could benefit from a more engaged look at urban landscapes, including our chemically supported lawnscapes. But, perhaps (I hope) the authors preferred to sow some seeds for thought and action rather than write a comprehensive treatise covering all aspects of living, realizing that cognitive (and guilt) overload might be counterproductive. If that was their intent, they have succeeded well because this book does have many seeds for talking and walking.